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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“CLEAN AND WHOLE”

Luke 5:12-26

- Let us turn to Luke 5:12-16.

“**Unclean! Unclean!**” That is what the leper shouts everywhere he goes: “**Unclean! Unclean!**”

“**Unclean**” describes his physical condition, his social status, and his spiritual state. “**Unclean**” is his life reduced to one word.

○ According to the Law {Lev 13:45-46}, “**Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ They must live alone; they must live outside the [community].**”

The man has a tent for shelter. His family leaves food for him at a designated spot. His most basic material needs are met. Still, he is a bundle of misery.

First, there is the disease itself. The word *λεπρασ* (*lepras*) applies to several disorders that range from mildly uncomfortable to utterly ruinous.

If he has one of the more severe sicknesses his skin is a mass of lesions and nodules, his muscles are contracting, his nerves are dying, his flesh is falling off. His physical appearance is the stuff of nightmares. He smells like rotting meat. And he will keep right on decaying until his heart gives out at last.

As if that isn’t bad enough, he bears a soul-crushing burden of grief, shame, and loneliness.

{Ge 37:34; 2 Sam 1:11} Tearing one’s clothes, {Lev 10:6; 21:10} going around with unkempt hair, and {Ezek 24:17, 22} covering the bottom of the face are normal ways of mourning for the dead. Only, the death he grieves is his own. His life is over. His future is gone. He is a walking, breathing corpse.

{Nu 14:6; 2 K 22:11; Ez 9:5} Ripped garments are also a sign that one has been humiliated by sin and failure, and {Mic 3:7} the mark of disgrace when God is silent and refuses to answer. Everyone looks upon him with a mixture of pity and contempt. Many blame him for his disease, as though it is a manifestation of his sin.

And this man is “**alone.**” If he has a wife or kids, he is cut off from them. He does not see family or friends. He is segregated from society. Any close contact he has is limited to other lepers – and that fellowship of the damned affords precious little comfort.

He cannot even take solace in his religious heritage. His *was* {Ro 9:3-5} “**the adoption;**” his *was* “**the divine glory, the covenants... the law, the temple worship and the promises.**” He *was* a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He *was* one of the Elect, one of the Chosen. He *was* an heir to the blessings of YHWH’s covenant community.

“*Was,*” not “*is.*” He is unable to keep most of the purity laws that set Israel apart from the nations. He is denied entry to the synagogue where the Word is read and preached, and to the Temple where sacrifices are made and prayers are offered. He is stranded outside the town, isolated and alienated from the people of God.

To be sure, his isolation is necessary for the protection of the community. (Even in 2013, when we have medications to cure leprosy, the Medline Plus website states that **“Prevention consists of avoiding close physical contact with untreated people.”**)

Still, imagine the layers of pain and distortion and disfigurement he is suffering. His life has been reduced to one word: **“Unclean”** describes his physical condition, his social status, and his spiritual state. Everywhere he goes he shouts, **“Unclean! Unclean!”**

■ And so {Lk 5:12} **“While Jesus [is] in one of the towns, [this] man [comes] along who [is] covered with leprosy. ...he [sees] Jesus...[falls] with his face to the ground and [begs] him, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’** It is a plea for physical healing, social restoration, and spiritual rebirth.

■ {Lk 5:13} **“Jesus [reaches] out his hand and [touches] the man. ‘I am willing,’ he [says]. ‘Be clean! And immediately the leprosy [leaves] him.”**

Jesus touches the man. No one touches a leper, except – *maybe* – another leper. (Even lepers are repulsed by what they see and smell.) This man has not really been touched since his diagnosis.

But Jesus touches him! He blesses him with physical healing, social restoration, and spiritual rebirth. Never again will he shout **“Unclean! Unclean!”** He is not that man anymore.

No one here is at risk of catching the physical disease leprosy.

Yet people all around us are crushed by spiritual leprosy. Some – maybe some of us – feel perpetually dirty

because of their own sins. Far too many are infected when a predator assaults their minds or their bodies, making them feel filthy, impure, contaminated.

Let us hear the Good News: The Lord Jesus has power to cleanse. He is more than able to bless us with physical healing, social restoration, and spiritual rebirth. No one is too degraded. He did it for the leper in Luke chapter 5, and he can do it for us.

■ On to verses 17-26.

Immobilized. Disabled. Broken. That is what the paralytic is.

He is at least a paraplegic, meaning his legs are nonfunctional. He cannot run, walk, hobble or crawl. He is dependent on other people to move him about.

But he may be a quadriplegic, in which case his arms and hands are equally useless. Is so he cannot pick up an object, cannot embrace another human being, cannot fold his hands in prayer. Someone else must scratch his itches, feed him, and clean him.

This man is unemployable. Begging for handouts is the only occupation available to a paralytic.

If he was paralyzed before adulthood he has not taken a wife and never will. If he did not father a child before his disability, he never will.

This in a culture that puts a premium on lineage, {I.S.B.E.} **“as may be seen from the long genealogical records found everywhere in the Old Testament”** and in the Gospels. Their emphasis arises from Scripture itself. In it the Creator commands humankind to {Ge 1:28} **“Be fruitful and increase in number.”** In it

he teaches that {Ps 127:3} **“Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him.”** If this paralytic is childless he is a dead branch.

Not only so, along with the Holy Land offspring are *the* major blessing that the LORD YHWH pledges to Israel in covenant relationship. To be a descendant of Abraham, and to give life to sons and daughters who are also descendants of Abraham, is to participate in Israel's covenant with the Living God. Without children, his participation in the covenant is limited.

■ Yet God has blessed him with good friends. In verses 18-19 they carry him to the house where Jesus is teaching, in order **“to lay him before Jesus. When they [can] not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they [go] up on the roof”**, make an opening in it, **“and [lower] him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.”**

■ Verse 20 is surprising: **“When Jesus [sees] their faith, he [says], ‘Friend your sins are forgiven.’”**

We expect him to respond to the paralytic. Instead, he takes action because of the man's *friends*: **“When Jesus [sees] *their* faith, he [says]...”**

We expect him to first say, “Rise up and walk.” Instead, he announces, **“your sins are forgiven.”**

✍ It is not that the Messiah does not care about the human condition. It is that he sees our predicament so much clearer than we do.

We look at the paralytic and assume that his biggest problem is physical paralysis. Jesus looks at him, and he knows the man's biggest problem is alienation from God.

If Christ restores the paralytic's legs but not his spirit, he will be putting a band aid on a fatal wound. {Mt 16:26} **“What good will it do him if he gains”** mobility and, with it **“the whole world, but loses his soul?”**

This is food for thought for those who are disappointed when Sovereign God does not do as we ask. What we assume to be the greatest good might not be.

■ Verses 21-25 are just as surprising. Having pronounced forgiveness, we expect the Messiah to ask for a drum roll or to declare, **“Now for the main attraction: an exciting healing!”** He does not.

We expect the Messiah to heal the man so he can feel better, earn a living wage, maybe raise a family and participate fully in the covenant. Surely that is involved; but Christ's priority is to prove himself to his enemies who think to themselves, **“Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”**

And so Jesus says, **“Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that [I have] authority on earth to forgive sins...”** *then* he heals the man who stands up, takes his mat, and goes home praising God.

■ In verse 26 the crowd is amazed. They are filled with awe and praise God and say, **“We have seen remarkable things today.”**

No one here is a physical paralytic. But some are immobilized in other ways. We are spiritual cripples, ineffective and helpless.

We are trapped in brokenness, our strength sapped by bitterness, fear, anxiety, or pride. We are disabled by our lack of faith, hope, and love.

Bound up in self-pity and despair, we are unable to fully receive the love of God or love him back. Forget about really loving others!

Maybe we profess to walk with Jesus but it is all talk, no action. {2 Ti 3:5} We maintain a form of godliness, but without power.

Let us hear the Good News: The Lord Jesus has power to fix broken people. He is more than able to make us whole, to give us purpose, to bring us into the fullness of covenant life, and to glorify God by our very existence. He did it for the paralytic in Luke chapter 5, and he can do it for us.